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## IMPRECATION AS A MEANS OF EMPHASIS IN THE OLD FRENCH CHANSONS DE GESTE

BY

OLIVER TOWLES

The specific bibliography on the subject of Imprecation from a linguistic point of view is limited. The only treatment of the question, serious or incidental, known to me is an article entitled *Von Verwünschen*, by Professor Tobler of Berlin, published first in the "Mommsen Festschrift," and later in the Fourth Series of Tobler's "Vermischte Beiträge."

In review of Tobler's article, be it said that it consists of a collection of the various types of simple and emphasizing Imprecations in Old French with their significations, and that the author foregoes any attempt to classify and analyze and explain the different forms. This task of classifying the forms I have attempted myself, and I think that the mere classification, by illustrating the gradual process of development from the most simple to the most complex forms, furnishes satisfactory explanation of the construction wherever such explanation seems necessary.

The Imprecation in this function of an emphasis-bestower forms one of three divisions of a heading which we entitle: *Expressions serving to emphasize past, present and future statements by the invocation of some revered power or beloved object.* Such an invocation may be:

I. ADJURATIVE; in which case a wish stands in attestation, or emphasis of the speaker's words, as: *Si m' ait Dieu.*

II. INTERJECTIONAL; where the name of the power or object invoked is governed by a preposition, the whole expressive of a violent emotion, such as would naturally accompany great decision of mind or state of assurance, as: *Par mon chief.*

III. IMPRECATIVE; where, at least in its original form, the speaker calls down a curse upon himself in case he speak not the truth, as: *Maudis soie, se ce n'est vrai=May I be cursed, if this be not so.*

The basis of the emphasizing Imprecation is naturally the simple direct Imprecation of one's enemy. The Old French authors display great inventiveness in the manufacture of this kind of invective. Some of the most common forms are:

*Rol.* 1958: *Mal aies tu.* — *Li Nerbonnais*, 5140: *A cent deables soit son cors comandé.* — *Aiol*, 2897: *Mal ait ses ciés.* — *Coven. Viv.* 937: *Mal des gloutons qui les ont engendrez.* — *Cour. Louys*, 200: *Mal dahé ait parmi la croiz del chief.* — etc.

The emphasizing Imprecations formed from these simple Imprecations are of two types, depending upon whether the object of Imprecation be a known, specified person, as in the fundamental form: *Maudis soie, se* etc., or an unknown, unspecified person: *Mal ait cil, qui*, etc.

In the first case the specified object of the Imprecation becomes the subject of a conditional or temporal statement appended to the Imprecation, and the whole is equivalent to an emphatic denial of this statement in the name of the speaker. So: *Aiol*, 1920: *Dameldex me confonge, se ja en ferai garde* (= *I will not take care*). — *Alisc.* 6726, a: *S'or ne me venge, ja n'aie je salu* (= *I will avenge myself*). In the second case the unspecified object of the Imprecation becomes the subject of an annexed relative clause, the statement of which is denied likewise in the name of the speaker. So: *Rol.* 1040: *Dient Franceis: Dehet ait ki s'enfuit. Ja pur murir ne rus en faldrat uns* (= *We will not flee*). — *Aiol*, 157: *Mal dehait qui laira por povreté Que jor ne voise en France al roi parler* (= *I will most certainly go to France, etc.*).

For the present we will examine the former type, in which, as I said, a definite, known person is the object of the Imprecation. We find examples of the construction for the 1 pers. in future, present and past time, and for the 3 pers. in past time.

The construction is most logical in the 1 pers. for future time, and it is evidently from this point that the development began. The speaker calls down a curse upon himself in case he commit or do not commit a certain act. It is not believable that any man would curse himself conditionally, if he had the slightest suspicion that this condition would ever come true. Consequently, to the mind of the hearer the whole utterance is equivalent to the expres-

sion of a fixed intention on the part of the speaker. The act intended lies in the future, but the statement of the intention is in the present. It results, then, that even when the act is in the future, it is the present veracity of the speaker as regards his intention that is emphasized, just as well as when the act is in the present or in the past, such as: *Mal aie je se jeo ce fais*, or *ce ai fait*. Examples of the construction are: *Alisc.* 6726, a: *S'or ne me venge, ja n'aie je salu* (= *I will avenge myself*). — *Rol.* 3757: *Fels seie, se jo l'ceil.* — *Aiol.* 9120: *Darneldex me confonge, se ja en ferais garde.*

The following are grammatically in the 3 pers., but logically in the 1. *Anseis de Carthage*, 7619: *Et se nous somes de paiens, pour-sivis, Dahait Joieuse (his sword) se souvent n'i guencis.* — *Doon de Maience*, 6252: *Doon refusing an offer: Que honni soit or Do, se mer-chi vos en rent.*

It being then a question of emphasizing the veracity of the speaker, there is no reason why the subject of the dependent clause should not be different from the object of the Imprecation, whereby we would have: *Mal aie je se il l'a fait*. Although I have no examples of this form from Old French, the parallel in English and the reasonableness of the extension give us a right to suppose its existence. At this point the English parallel ceases, while the French goes on one step further. In the type: *Mal aie je, se il l'a fait*, the 1 pers. of the Imprecation seems to be attracted to the 3 pers. of the conditional clause, and we reach the very common form: *Mal ait se il l'a fait*, which would correspond to an English: *May he be cursed if he did this*, in the sense of: *He did not do it.* So: *Aiol.* 7351: *Issus est de la canbre, vers Aiol s'en torna, Mal ait se a conseil un seul en apela. Mais a molt haute vois son seigneur escriu.*

The second type of emphasizing Imprecations, though quite different from the first in form, is identical with it in signification, — at least at the outset. For example, at Roncesvaux, when proposals of peace and surrender are made, the French troops cry out as one man: *Mal ait ki s'enfuit*, = *We will not flee.* The object of the Imprecation is an unspecified person. Still the expression is equivalent to a positive affirmation in the name of the speaker.

In the case of the first form, where the Imprecation is followed by a conditional clause, the asseveration is usually, though by no means necessarily, that of one person; while in the second form, the asseveration is more generally in the name of the 1 pers. plural. This kind of affirming Imprecation is also found in present, past and future time. So: *Rol.* 1047: *Dient Franceis: Dehet ait ki s'enfuit. Ja pur murir ne vus en faldrat uns.* — *Guy de Bourg,* 856: *Dahais ait qui an chaut.* — *Couron. Louys,* 1855: *Dahé ait qui vos crient.* — *Li Nerbonnais,* 606: A Saracen asks a body of troops for whom certain provisions are being brought. Their leader replies: *Vos n'i avez neant. Mal dahaz ait anz o nes par devant, Qui ainz por vos l'aporta tant ne quant. La vitaille est Aymeri le ferrant.* This is an emphatic manner of saying: *We never brought it for you.*

The interesting feature of these expressions is the fact that while they are formally identical with the literal imprecating of a curse upon some one who may have actually committed a certain act, (Compare: *Li Nerbonnais*, 4123: *En la fenetre un pertuis avissa. Maleoit soit icel qui le perca.* — *Aliscans,* 3780: *Rainouart is obliging four knaves to carry his weapon: Entre leur denz prirent a runeter: Maleois soit ki cest fust .doit porter.*), in their actual meaning they are totally opposed to such non-asseverative Imprecations. These asseverative Imprecations are, to put it mildly, unfavorable assertions in regard to some third person, while the true asseverative Imprecation is always a favorable statement in regard to a person or persons of the third person, unknown and unspecified. Furthermore it would seem that the only manner of distinguishing whether the asseverative or litteral, imprecating value exists in any example, such as: *Mal ait qui l'a fait,* (apart from the context), depends entirely upon the manner of enunciation, — in other words, upon the relative degree of stress given the pronoun. I think we have every reason to suppose that wherever the relative pronoun, representing a hypothetic person, be strongly stressed in pronunciation, or, in the written language, by the presence of a demonstrative antecedent, *cil, cist*, etc., in that case the utterance is no longer asseverative, giving a favorable statement in regard to the 1 pers., but tends to be literally imprecating and unfavorable to some third person or persons, unspecified.

This fact seems to be of the greatest importance in connection with the more complex form of the second type of asseveration, i.e. *Mal ait cil qui l'ait* (*l'a*) *fait*, with the signification: *Not a one of them did it*, where, though the construction is still asseverative, the asseveration is not in the 1 pers. but in the 3. So: *Aiol*, 4536: *Dont se teurent Normant et Hurepois Et Flamenc Et li Francois; Mal ait cil qui s'osast lever des dois, Tant douterent Mibrien cel riche roi.* — *Charroi de Nymes*, 1412: *Mar soit de cel qui en eschappast vivant,* — *Li Nerbonnais*, 4550: *Voit son barnage envers terre encline, Mal soit de cel qui ait un mot soné.* — *Aliscans*, 7695: *Mal soit de cel qui l'osast aprochier.* — *Aiol*, 9871: *Mal soit de l'un des .iiii. qui en puist vis aler Qu'a lor coutiaus ne soit trestout esboielés.*

Allow me to contrast these two type constructions:

- (1) *Mal ait qui l'a fait* = *We did not do it.*
- (2) *Mal ait cil qui l'ait fait* = *They did not do it.*

The only formal difference between these two, between which there exists such a wide difference of meaning, is the presence of the demonstrative antecedent *cil* in the second example and the use of the subjunctive. The differences of signification are diametrical. First the circumstances under which these expressions would be used are not the same. The first is a favorable affirmation made by the speaker of himself and his friends; the relative pronoun is not stressed. The second is always, as the examples show us, a more or less unfavorable assertion in regard to a group of persons, unidentified with the speaker; the pronoun is emphasized by the presence of the demonstrative antecedent. The presence of this demonstrative antecedent, by emphasizing the identity of the hypothetical person, is apparently sufficient to change the construction from a favorable assertion of the 1 pers.; that is, that while still asseverative the literal Imprecation is given more prominence. In construction (1), to judge from my examples, the subjunctive does not occur; in construction (2), practically always. In the type: *Mal ait qui l'a fait*, it is not denied that some one may have committed the act; the speaker merely says: *May he be cursed who did it; I did not.* In: *Mal ait qui l'ait fait*, however, the very existence of the one of such a kind as to commit the act is denied. We have the subjunctive here apparently

for the same reasons for which we have it in the following examples:

*Aliscans*, 2898: *Asses parole, ne trueve kil desdie.* — *ib.*, 3114: *N'i ot si cointe ki l'osast refuser.* — *Marie Fraisne*, 247: *Nus ne la vit ki ne l'amast.* For construction (2) I have two examples of the use of the indicative:

*Gaufray*, 2139: *Et je que vous diroie?* *Il les a tous tués; Que mal soit de cheli qui en est escapés.* — *Charroi de Nymes*, 146: *Grant fu la boce qui fu au renver, Mal soit del mire qvi li me dut saner.*